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EDITORS' ATTITUDES TOWARD OPINION POLLS

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EDITORS' ATTITUDES TOWARD OPINION POLLS*

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The spectacular failure of the *Literary Digest* poll in 1936 precipitated extensive discussion on the question of the value of opinion polls generally. Outside of advertising practice and market research, newspapers have probably been the most frequent users of polling practices but most of these uses have been brief attempts and were ordinarily not conducted along lines laid down by students of polling procedures. Since 1935, two polling procedures have been established which have placed the matter of ascertaining public opinion on a fairly reliable basis—namely, the American Institute of Public Opinion and the quarterly polls of *Fortune* magazine. Because of the probable injury which the *Digest* debacle did to all polls, and in order to clarify the field so that some of the mistaken and inadequate ideas of polls and the function of properly conducted polls may be better understood, this study was projected with a view toward ascertaining the current attitude of editors toward opinion polls, and their probable future.

Consequently a single-sheet letter was mailed to 1,735 editors, including all newspapers in the United States with circulations approximately above 1,000.¹ The letter asked reply to four questions as follows: (1) In your opinion are newspaper readers interested in polls? (2) Do you think public interest in polls is growing? (3) Do you believe the polls conducted by *Fortune*, Dr. Gallup, *Ladies Home Journal*, and others accurately measure opinion? (4) Do you think the results serve a useful purpose? Ample space was provided for remarks, and comments were invited in an introductory statement as follows: "In connection with my class in Public Opinion and some current research it would be of great interest to us to know what newspaper editors think of public opinion polls. Will you be good enough to answer the four questions below? If you feel so inclined please add any comments or remarks that may better express your attitude."

*Recommended for publication by Dr. J. R. Kantor, Jan. 16, 1939.

¹To have representation in sparsely populated areas, some under this figure were included. Foreign language papers were not included.

A total of 1040 returns were received (60%) which indicates a surprising interest of editors in the question. Included in the respondents were most of the important papers in the country, and

TABLE I

		N	Per cent	
1. Are newspaper readers interested?	Yes	741	71.2%	(89.2)*
	Casually	187	18.0	
	No	98	9.4	
2. Is public interest growing?	Yes	428	41.2	(46.4)
	A little	55	5.3	
	No	486	46.7	
3. Are polls an accurate measure of public opinion?	Yes	370	35.6	(60.5)
	Roughly	259	24.9	
	No	254	24.4	
Fortune Poll accurate		50	4.8	
Gallup Poll accurate		171	16.4	
4. Do the results serve a useful purpose?	Yes	503	48.3	(62.3)
	A little	145	14.0	
	No	354	34.0	

*Figure in brackets is "yes" plus "casually" giving total favorable response.

every type of daily was well represented. The quantitative results are given in Table I. The most surprising finding is that almost nine out of ten editors believe that newspaper readers are interested to some extent in polls but that they are equally divided in their belief as to whether or not there is an increase in this interest.² The results

²These returns were all in prior to the November elections of 1938 in which the Gallup poll missed the Dewey-Lehman contest by only $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1% point and the Wagner figure by the same, even though there was a disparity of three points in the votes received by these two men both on the same ticket. Knowledge of this may have caused a somewhat different result in the proportions, since this performance has provoked considerable current comment.

on question 3 suggest that only about one-third of the editors have confidence in their accuracy but approximately one-fourth in addition believe that they may be roughly approximate. Editors are also divided on whether or not a useful purpose is served—only about one-half committing themselves definitely while others who are doubtful grant there may be some good.

The statistical aspect of the findings does not disclose the great variety of specific attitudes which editors hold, hence an analysis of the remarks and comments (in some cases full letters) will first be given in summary form.

ATTITUDES EXPRESSIVE OF DISFAVOR

The comments that carry an unfavorable opinion were somewhat more frequent than those which conveyed favorable attitudes. An examination of 337 comments in the unfavorable category may be roughly divided into five objections. Most frequent (in fact specifically mentioned 146 times) is the belief that the *Digest* has destroyed public confidence in poll results, with belief that unwittingly the poll takers may be piling up inaccurate results through the operation of a constant error such as party or age bias.³ The second largest group of objections was that polls may be used to carry propaganda, there being 57 mentions. Since most of the editors did not offer specific evidence, the writer is led to believe that a good part of this is to be classified as mere suspicion. The next largest number of objections is based upon a perfectly legitimate question, namely that a poll may easily present an incorrectly determined cross-section. In support, some editors gave evidence of fairly good insight into polling methods. A fourth class asserted that polls at best could show merely trends and could never be substituted for elections nor could they be depended upon to give an absolutely trustworthy prediction. Lastly, there were 38 specific mentions of the "band wagon" theory or the belief that a poll tends to resolve indecision on the part of vacillating citizens and causes an irrational tendency to vote as the poll trend suggests.

This classification of objections to polls reflects general points of

³For a careful study of factors operating to cause errors in the mail type of opinion poll see Cahalan, D. and Meier, N. C., "The Validity of the Mail-Ballot Poll." *Psychol. Rec.*, 1939, 3:3-11.

view. Individual comments, however, reveal some highly significant observations which are of great interest to the more theoretical aspects of public opinion. By some, polls are accepted as useful only to public office holders (10)⁴, editors (6), executives in business and industry (2) and educators (1)—not to the general public. They may, several suggest, offer to the politician ideas for reorganizing and revamping his tactics, or to place money where poll results indicate it is most needed. The predictive aspect, some hold, is primarily a catering to the gambling "instinct." One prominent New England editor, while believing firmly that the results of polls intelligently treated serve a useful purpose, preferred not to have election polls because "the public needs all the freedom it can have, to use all its capacity to reason without being so strongly tempted by the power of suggestion".⁵ But a New Jersey editor counters with: "Serious mistakes can be made by lack of knowledge about trends. The polls help to avoid them." One opinion holds that a qualified person can predict anything that a poll may show, while another holds that the columnists "don't always know what they're talking about."

There is personal belief expressed by a considerable number that most serious polls are conducted as honestly as their sponsors can make them, yet at the same time they offer reasons for believing that other polls can be so designed as to carry propaganda (may be "manipulated," "doctored," "rigged") (17). "I can carry a poll for or against anything without cheating or destroying returns and I'm not very smart" asserts a southern editor. Three more imply a general distrust, while four believe the man on the street does not give his real convictions.

Other attitudes regard polls as futile and in some respects pernicious. This, if true, should be a matter of concern. The frequently met with "band-wagon" thesis or "tides" theory is of this character. Thirty objectors to polls present the specific argument that poll results—particularly if announced *before* the public has had time to give due consideration to the issues involved—work against individual decisions, and tend to precipitate opinion *in the direction of*

⁴Specific mentions of this point.

⁵Individuals may be identified on request to author after consent is obtained.

uninformed and immature thinking. Ten maintain that the country is too large, the issues too complex, interests too diversified—for an intelligent opinion to be formed widely and hence the poll only measures public opinion thinly. Early trends (presumed to be premature states of opinion) thus tend to become fixed. Others, furthermore, argue that a premium is placed upon snap judgment and not upon mature attitudes resulting from adequate study (7).

Other editors advance observations that tend in some instances to support, in others to neutralize or refute, the "band-wagon" premise. Some state that an unfair advantage is given the leading side ("morons gain strength"); others that the poll shows "wind direction" merely, no one being really influenced by it, certainly no thinking people (9). Several assert that only the protest voter participates—these are, relatively considered, too active.⁶ Knowledge that one side is considerably ahead, it is argued, tends to depress much needed minority expression. But several point out that a compensatory situation may be erected: the apparently popular side may be lulled to a false security while the poll-indicated underdog may be spurred on to fight harder.

UTILITY OF POLLS

Most of the favorable attitudes toward polls seem to be based upon the assumption that polls *may* be scientifically planned, honestly conducted and when adequately financed can yield fairly accurate cross-sections of opinion. The *Fortune* and Gallup polls are specifically mentioned as being of this character. Information so obtained is regarded as news-worthy as a check against misinformation and as a public service for legislation and an informed democracy.

Specifically, there are nineteen mentions that polls make people *think*, some stating also that they tend to stimulate interest in and discussion of public questions. Other purposes of a useful nature are cited as follows: gives leaders (legislators) a gauge of what public wants them to do (11); serves as an aid in democratic process specifically (a) providing knowledge of public affairs, (8); (b) the good citizen being the well-informed one (6); (c) being

⁶There is evidence that this in fact has operated in the mail ballot type of poll (Author).

anticipatory, they aid in long-run planning (5); (d) keeps up interest in national affairs (6). Additional comments include: shows changes in sentiment and aids in visualizing reactions to laws passed (3); stimulates more intensive reasoning and tends to concentrate interest in matters of public concern; may help point up the arguments pro and con on an issue of significance; serves to inform the American people that we still have freedom of opinion which can and may be expressed . . . tends to encourage the average person that he is still articulate. As one Florida editor points out an accurate poll would indicate the will of the people and serve the same purpose as the "vote of confidence" method used abroad. The point is made by one editorial writer that "if the theory of democratic government is sound it should function better when the desires of the voter are known", and an Oklahoma editor adds: "Democracy can stand only on a thinking people," and that "anything which reveals the trend of thought provokes thought," Polls, scientifically planned and conducted, may, in another's opinion, "indicate the fundamental soundness of decisions formulated by syntheses of representative mass interests."

THE FUTURE OF POLLS

A number of carefully worded opinion-analyses advance critical views which generally favor intelligently planned polls, but point out certain difficulties and problems involved in ascertaining true public opinion. It is pointed out that issue is frequently taken with the accompanying interpretation of poll results in terms of cause and effect and that nobody has yet been able definitely to ascribe reasons *why* public opinion changes. Polls, furthermore, fail to consider the gradations of public opinion⁷ and the mental reservations which many people are unable to express when answering; being purely or primarily quantitative, they are unable to distinguish between a whim and a profound conviction (3). One proposes that to insure public confidence the sponsor should announce with the poll results the areas canvassed, the number of contacts made, and the methods employed. Public opinion seems to a Michigan editor to be a process "which is arrived at through a more deliberate

⁷Experimental work has been done on this matter—Author.

process and through a more statistical submission and analysis of the facts than is possible through any of these processes."

Ten opinions advance the view that too many polls tend to destroy the usefulness of the good ones, particularly if they are for no particular purpose other than circulation building. The real problem (affirmed by fifteen) is in the nature of the particular poll: that polls will merit public confidence only so long as they are honestly, accurately and intelligently conducted. Six summarize the problem thus: if conducted by the right man, with intelligent workers properly trained, covering a broad cross-section of opinion properly computed, and dealing with questions of real interest—conducted throughout on a high plane—polls may serve a useful purpose in a democracy.

